DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 173 CS 207 325

AUTHOR Hudson, Kathleen
TITLE Writers' Comments on Writing: Implications for a Composition Class.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (72nd, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1982).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors; Creative Teaching; Higher Education; Reading Materials; Revision (Written Composition); *Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

Writers' comments on writing can help teachers incorporate within their classrooms the idea that writing is a process of discovery. They can remind students and teachers how important enthusiasm, motivation, and reinforcement are. Even though such comments are not saying anything new, saying the same thing in new terminology can lead to new insights. Many writers stress the importance of discipline in the writing process and the need to store up information. These ideas apply directly to the procedures in a writing class, such as keeping a journal and recording observed information on note cards. An entire writing workshop was taught on the basis of what writers had to say about writing. Writing was approached from a different point of view each class period, as the teacher provided the structure and the students supplied the language. Students also read interviews with writers in "Writers at Work" and discussed what applied to their individual writing in class. Writers also taught about the need for time and the importance of revision. (JL)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

Kathleen Hudson

ED225173

# Writers' Comments on Writing: Implications for a Composition Class

In a book entitled The Creative Process Gertrude Stein says the following

> You will write if you will write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought, or afterwards in a recasting. Yes, before in a thought, but not in careful thinking. It will come if it is there and if you will let it come, and if you have anything you will get a sudden creative recognition. You won't know how it was, even what it is, but it will be creation if it came out of the pen and out of you and not out of an architectural drawing of the thing you are doing.[1]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

This is one of the most commonly held beliefs of writers and other artists. The idea of the process as a discovery. E.M. Forster says, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say." Francois Sagan says that she has to start writing to have ideas. Truman Capote, when asked if a book is organized in his head before he starts writing, gives the following answer: "I invariably have the illusion that the whole play of a story, its start and middle and finish, occur in my mind simultaneously--that I'm seeing it in one flash. But in the working-out, the writing-out, infinite surprises happen."

Our writing classes need to incorporate this important idea. This means giving students time to write with the emphasis on the discovery that may occur, rather than the product that may result. I begin every day of my writing workshops with freewriting time. Sometimes I initiate a point of inspiration, such as reading a poem to the class or showing a picture. Other times I just tell them to write what's on their mind. I often ask at the end of the writing time if they were surprised by anything that they wrote. We take that surprise as a starting point for another bit of writing. Peter Elbow talks of loop writing as he moves from focus to focus. I like to move from surprise to surprise, thus supporting what published writers tell us about the writing process.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kathleen Hudson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS207251

Writers' comments on writing also remind us how important enthusiasm, motivation, and reinforcement are. We often forget this in a classroom while concentrating on our subject. All writers say that some need must be felt, some sense of urgency. Warren Beck in the book Hidden Streams says, "Good fiction can be originated only by a mind aroused to ardor in its grasping for fuller and further perceptions; the necessity which mothers significant invention must be urgent." Lois Burford, a novelist, says "I don't write unless I can't help myself; if I can help myself, I don't do it at all." Meg Campbell in The Writer magazine says that, "unless something provokes that eager inner itch of curiosity, I can't get involved enough in the story to make it my own, and write it all down." John Dos Passos says, "Curiosity urges you on--the driving force." Pablo Neruda says, "I always wrote out of internal necessity, and I imagine that this is what happens with all writers, poets especially."

We can encourage this sense of urgency, this internal necessity. If we give assignments, our assignments must initiate a response. Don Murray, in his book Learning by Teaching, talks of teaching writing without assignments, letting the student's own voice speak about his own topic. A teacher can motivate a student to want and need to say something, with or without assignments. We do have that responsibility in a writing class.

What we learn from writers about writing is not necessarily new information, but information presented in different ways, different metaphorical structures. Are we re-inventing the wheel over and over as we talk about writing. I think not. There is real validity in stating the same thing over and over with different words. New terms lead to new or more insight. New metaphors may open new doors, or may swing open the same door a bit wider. Another way of talking about writing as

discovery is inherent in the following quotation by Sue Grafton which appeared in The Writer magazine: "When a writer catches the first hint of a novel in the air, he can then (with great caution examine the idea, turn it over in his mind, set it free on a piece of paper and see where it leads." Another way of saying that a writer must care about his subjects is phrased as follows: "I wrote my first novel for me, not you." Graham Greene says, "I write novels about what interests me and I can't write about anything else."

Many writers talk about the importance of discipline in the writing process. One writer interviewed in The Writer magazine says that "intuitive feel starts you off, but it is discipline that makes you finish." When Conrad Aiken was asked about training and study he replied, "Yes, I compelled myself all through to write an exercise in verse, in a different form, every day of the year. I turned out my page every day, of some sort--I mean I didn't give a damn about the meaning, I just wanted to master the form. . . . very good training." Don Murray says that he tries to write the first 15 minutes of each day, whether he feels like it or not. This practice certainly indicates a type of discipline inherent in the process. Archibald MacLeish says, "The first discipline is the realization that there is a discipline--that all art begins and ends with discipline, that any art is first and foremost a craft." We as teachers know this, but the words of writers can help us reinforce the concept with our students.

The need to store up information is reiterated by many writers. They keep journals, take notes, save their attempts, write down ideas, things people say. R.V. Cassill says in The Writer magazine that "coming across material and retreiving it in verbal form for your notebook is an act of the imagination--an incompleted act without the subsequent labors of combining your discoveries into a unified

form, but one of the most crucial steps in assuring that your fiction will have the throb of life." This comment directly applies to our procedures in a writing class. Not only do I have students keep a journal, but I also ask them to store other information. Sometimes we keep 3x5 cards with us for a certain period of time (two weeks) and record any unusual use of the language that we observe. Joseph says, "I keep a small sheath of three-by-five cards in my billfold. If I think of a good sentence, I'll write it down. It won't be an idea. . . .What I put down is an actual line of intended text." He wants to be sure that he doesn't lose that important line after it comes to him, no matter where he is when it comes. It doesn't always happen in a classroom for our students either.

When George Seferis was asked if he kept notes, he answered, "Sometimes I do. Sometimes I do not. There are things which you have to remember, and I have to record these some where, so of course I make notes. . . . When I say notes, I mean there are those on the material, notes that are ideas, poetical ideas. For example, poetical expressions, poetical utterances, that is the kind of notes I mean." Isaac Singer says, "I never go out to look for a story. I take notes, but never like a reporter. My stories are all based upon things that have come to me in life without my going out to look for them."

Last spring I taught my entire writing workshop on the basis of what writers had to say about writing. I could use many of the assignments in many of the current rhetoric texts, but I anchored them to the experience and the comment of a professional writer. At the beginning of each class we spent some time freewriting. Ken Macrorie coined the term, but Jack Kerouac was talking about the same thing when he said, " . . . and it still can be done if the thinking during the swift writing is confessional and pure and all excited with the life of it. And be sure of this, I spent my entire youth writing slowly with revisions and

endless re-hashing speculation and deleting and got so I was writing one sentence a day and the sentence has no Feeling. Goddamn it, FEELING is what I like in art, not Craftiness and the guiding of feelings."

Each class period I would try to approach writing from a different point of view. There is no one way to approach a writing assignment. Even though writers agree in some areas, the differences are too many to lump together. I let my students know that if one approach doesn't work, doesn't motivate them, perhaps the next one will. In one class period I supply the language by passing out magazines, or newspapers and tell them to provide a structure, a new structure for that language. Having the class re-write a poem as a short story gives this same type of practice. William Burroughs cuts up language and rearranges it. He says, "Any narrative passage or any passage, say of poetic images is subject to any number of variations, all of which may be interesting and valid in their own right. A page of Rimbaud cut up and rearranged will give you quite new images. Rimbaud images--real Rimbaud images--but new ones. . . .Cut ups establish new connections between images and one's range of vision consequently expands." Burroughs keeps interesting newspaper stories in his files. He also keeps a photographic file. A writing class could use this idea as a project over a semester.

Another class period I supply the structure and let the class supply the language. Writing a Haiku poem is filling a structure. Writing a five paragraph theme (heaven forbid!) is also filling a structure. Some writers start with an idea of form. For others the form and content are inseparable. Students need to be exposed to the many options available to them, options not only in product but also options in process. Joseph Heller talks of the benefits of working within a certain framework: "There's an essay of T.S. Eliot's in which he praises the

disciplines of writing, claiming that if one is forced to write with a certain framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom, however, the chances are good that the work will sprawl." This comment supports my urge (need) to give assignments, even though I vary the approach daily.

I also have my students read interviews with writers found in Writers at Work. We spend a class period discussing remarks that writers have made that seem to apply to the individual student's own writing. Discussion is important in a writing class, as is reading. Writers comment on the importance of fertile ground. Macleish says "You have to live to write in more senses than one, and no one can ever live enough--there will always be cracks in the knowledge and that will always show." Neruda says, "The life of a poet must be reflected in his poetry. That is the law of the art and a law of life." Daphne DuMaurier says "The germ of an idea can lie dormant for months, or years, then germinate and come to flower, because the soil is right, the atmosphere propitious." William Nolan, author of Logan's Run says that ideas come from the inner domain. "The land inside us required careful tending. . . .I can't tell you what must be put into your land, but I can tell you what went into mine, and what I am still putting into it today."

Writers tell us they need time, not only time to write but time to dawdle or time to be quiet. I asked Don Murray how he filled his well, or fertilized his field in preparation for writing. He said the most helpful thing for him to do now was have a quiet time, for him a way of using what he already knows. Catherine Bowen says, "What the writer needs is an empty day ahead. A big round quiet space of empty hours to, as it were, tumble about in." E.L. Doctorow says, "I have to write every day because, the way I work, the writing generates the writing. If I'm not writing, nothing is going to happen." Most of us have heard

about Hemingway's work habits, including the fact that he liked to stand up as he wrote. He says about writing, "My working habits are simple: long periods of thinking, short periods of writing." Our students are encouraged when they realize that everyone needs a different amount of time, but time is an important element in everyone's process. And Robert Penn Warren comments on solitude, time to be alone, "I would say that I would like to have a certain amount of time alone every day. I don't take any communication, no telephone calls. Just solitude. There's a need. And solitude is not just because you've got a job on your hands. Solitude is blankness that makes accidents happen."

Writers have quite a bit to say about that magic word revision. When Frank O'Conner was asked, "Do you rewrite?", he answered, "Endlessly, endlessly, endlessly. And keep on rewriting, and after it's published, and then after it's published in book form, I usually rewrite it again. I've rewritten versions of most of my early stories and one of these days, God help, I'll publish these as well." Anthony Burgess revises with each page as he goes along. "Rewriting the whole book would bore me." Two different ways of revising. Both writers stress the importance of revising, though. Some writers revise in their heads as they go along. Others must get it down on paper, look at it, and go to work. When Isak Dinesen was asked about rewriting her tales, she says "Oh, I do, I do. It's hellish. Over and over again. Then when I think I'm finished, and Clara copies them out to send to publishers, I look over them, and have a fit, and rewrite again." Steinbeck suggests another method. "Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is done. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material."

Our students can be challenged to revise using several different methods until they find the one that suits them, or until they discover the method they are already using. It is beneficial in a writing class to take time out to talk about writing, to look carefully at the way we are writing. This knowledge does not necessarily produce better writers, but if the questioning leads to some sort of discovery then a better writer will emerge eventually.

I've quoted professional writers throughout this paper. I'd like to end by quoting another group of writers, a group we can all learn from--our students. The following excerpts are from a set of freewritings based on quotations about the writing process:

One student says, "I am the type of person who waits for the deadline. I started early this time and I am discovering a little about my style and my personality by the way I write. I was starting to tear down a front and reveal the way I'd always wanted to write." This comment reminds us that forcing a student to try some new procedures, through assignments or suggestions, can produce beneficial results.

Another student says, "The art of writing ignites the unconscious, just as ideas are ignited in our conscious mind when we see a familiar object. Maybe the physical appearance of words on paper stimulates the words in our mind." This reminds us once again of the importance of physically writing, not just thinking about writing.

"Thoughts are in my head--drifting, floating, waiting for me to find and claim. At times it is hard to release them on this lines sheet of paper--this resting spot for thoughts. Oh, what a pleasure when the meaning is clear," says another student. Surely all writers have felt this same way before.

Another writes:"Before I begin to write a paper it is best if I have chosen a topic but do not know how I am going to tell my story. Then I am usually more involved because the final product will in some way be a surprise."

"I write so that I can discover who I am today, who I was yesterday, and who I will be tomorrow. They are all the same person except they have each experienced something new in life." Writing as discovery.

The following student may not be a better writer because of the quantity of writing she is doing, but she is motivated, enthusiastic, and ready to learn. An important starting point.

"I have never done so much writing in my life. I've sort of been spilling my guts. It's fantastic. I'm enjoying myself so much, writing isn't a labor anymore. I think I can actually manage it." And is it helpful for students to hear this? "I have found myself writing something one way after thinking about saying it another way." I think so.

And a final comment of the stuff of writing--words. "Words tend to create new directions. I have noticed that if I change a word to one that has a slightly different meaning than the original word, I can change the direction of my writing."

Writing as discovery, the sense of urgency necessary, the importance of discipline, the need to accumulate information in many forms, the significance of time, the practice of revision are but a few of the things we can learn from writers' comments on the writing process. I am certainly not advocating a system based on these comments, rather a series of approaches that incorporates these comments along with many others. I agree with Susan Sontag on Roland Barthes when she describes his "desire to subvert all tendencies to system-making."[2] I do not envision a complete system, for that implies finiteness, that implies answers. The questions are more important.

## Notes

[1]Gertrude Stein, The Creative Process, ed. Brewster Ghiselin ( New York: New American Library, Inc., 1952), p. 159.

[2]Susan Sontag, "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes," New Yorker, 26 April, 1982, p. 127.

List of Works Consulted

Beck, Warren. Hidden Streams : Essays on Writing. Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburg Press, 1950.

Murray, Donald. University of New Hampshire. Personal collection of quotations.

Stein, Gertrude. "John Hyde Preston: A Conversation with Gertrude Stein." In The Creative Process. Ed. Brewster Ghilelin. New York: New American Library, 1952.

The Writer. Vol. 83-92(1970-1979).

Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews. Ed. Malcolm Cowly. New York: Viking Press, 1958.

Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews. Ed. George Plimpton. New York: The Viking Press, 1963.

Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews. Ed. George Plimpton. New York: The Viking Press, 1967.

Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews. Ed. George Plimpton. New York: The Viking Press, 1976.

Writers at work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews. Ed. George Plimpton. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.